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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a procedure for analyzing sentential themes and demonstrates how it may be useful to students when they consider the effectiveness of their own sentences in the process of revising a piece of writing. The paper shows that, by analyzing sentential themes and their function in academic writing, students can learn to perform the same analysis in revising sentences in their own writing and thus can develop their ability to communicate information more effectively. The paper analyzes a scholarly article in psychology to illustrate the kinds of sentential themes that occur in academic writing. The paper is in three major sections; the first section is devoted to the theoretical framework underlying this approach, in particular discussing "theme and rheme," and "given and new" information. The second section deals with analyzing sentential themes, focusing on four major themes and their functions. The final section discusses implications for teaching sentence revision in college writing. It uses the draft (and the revision) of a student paper summarizing an article to illustrate common problems with sentence style in student writing. Contains 14 references; a glossary is attached. (SR)

An Analysis of Sentential Themes in Academic Writing: Implications for Teaching Sentence Style and Revision

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AN ANALYSIS OF SENTENTIAL THEMES IN ACADEMIC WRITING: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING SENTENCE STYLE AND REVISION

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My goal in this paper is to introduce a procedure for analyzing sentential themes and to demonstrate how it may be useful to students when they consider the effectiveness of their own sentences in the process of revising a piece of writing. By analyzing sentential themes and their function in academic writing, I want to show that students can learn to perform the same analysis in revising sentences in their own writing and thus can develop their ability to communicate information more effectively. Inexperienced writers often communicate less effectively than they intend because they inappropriately place information new to their readers in themic position where readers do not expect it. They often fail to control the flow of given and new information in their sentences so that readers can easily follow the progression of an idea or argument. Witte and Faigley (1981) and Vande Kopple (1982, 1983) found that students write better papers when they develop an ability to use new information more effectively in the topics discussed in their papers. Close attention to what the reader knows from prior experience, from the immediate context, or from previous references in the text is central to the process of effective information management in sentence revisions.

I am particularly interested in analyzing sentential themes because in an earlier study in which I analyzed sample passages of scholarly writing in different academic disciplines, I found significant differences not only in cohesive patterns across disciplines but also in the distribution of given and new information within sentences (Lovejoy 1991). The beginnings of sentences—or what I am calling sentential themes—were especially important in helping the writers of these passages to communicate their ideas successfully. The writers in psychology and history, for example, often foregrounded new information (e.g., in prepositional phrases or adverbial clauses), either for purposes of focusing the discourse or for setting the stage for information that followed in the sentence. The writer in biology, on the other hand, frequently embedded new information in pre- and post-modifiers of the head word, which carried the given information, i.e., information already introduced into the discourse. In light of these variations and their effects on sentence style, I chose to limit my analysis in this paper to the kinds of sentential themes that occur in academic writing and that enable writers to communicate information efficiently and effectively. The focus of my analysis is a scholarly article in psychology (Oppenheimer and Miller 1988) entitled "Stereotypic views of medical educators toward students with a history of psychological counseling," published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, a leading journal in the counseling field and one of the top four APA journals in total circulation. This article reports on the results of an empirical study that attempts to determine whether medical students who have received psychological counseling for stress-related problems are negatively evaluated by decision makers, in this case the directors of residency programs who decide whether to interview and to accept medical school graduates into residency programs. My intention is to use this article to illustrate the kinds of sentential themes that occur in academic writing, ending with a discussion of some of the implications of this work for teaching sentence style and revision in introductory college writing.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical principles underlying the study of the content structure of the sentence have been debated in linguistic research as early as the nineteenth century (discussed in Firbas 1974). However, the procedure for studying the function of sentence elements at the discourse level is a relatively new development. Among linguists, the theory is commonly referred to as *Functional Sentence Perspective* (FSP), first popularized by Mathesius, one of the members of the Prague School of linguistics, in an article in 1939. Because linguists have produced an abundance of terminology in attempting to account for certain aspects of the communicative function of the sentence (see, e.g., Firbas 1966, 1974; Palkova and Palek 1978), the terminology and point of view used in the present study, and described in detail in Lovejoy and Lance (1991), derives mainly from Halliday (1967a, 1967b, 1985).

FSP theory, or what has come to be known as *information management*, entails two important and related distinctions. The first distinction is between *theme* and *rheme*, terms which represent the distribution of information in a sentence. As Halliday states it, the *theme* typically occurs at the beginning of a clause; it is therefore the point of departure in the verbal exchange, or as he puts it, "what I am talking about." It provides the setting for the remainder of the sentence—the *rheme*. The *rheme* constitutes the information the writer wants to impart about the *theme*; it is information the writer wants the reader to attend to for the moment as newly introduced into the argument. The following sentence, for example, shows the basic division of the sentence into theme and rheme, separated by three slashes:

> The trustees of the college /// voted to approve the construction of the science building.

In "ordinary" sentences containing subject, verb, object order with no special emphasis, the theme is equated with the subject of the sentence and the rheme with the predicate. However, sentence constructions in written discourse vary considerably and are often more complex, as in the opening sentence from the psychology article:

> Research has demonstrated that /// negative judgments may be made about persons who seek professional help in dealing with psychological problems....

In this sentence, the theme ends after the main subject and verb, and the rheme begins with the dependent noun clause. It would be possible, of course, to do a more delicate analysis of theme and rheme at the clause level, but I am interested only in dividing the sentence, however sophisticated its syntax, into one theme and one rheme. This kind of theme is *unmarked* because the sentence begins with the grammatical subject, "Research." It is the most common of the kinds of themes I will be discussing. Knowing where to place the theme-rheme boundary in more complex sentences requires a careful reading of the sentence in context to understand the meaning the writer is communicating. In earlier research (Lovejoy and Lance 1991), we found that in a careful reading of sentences in written discourse, there is a noticeable pitch drop at the end of the theme and, near the beginning of the rheme, often on the first word, an abrupt peak in pitch level. We borrowed from Halliday's work on intonation to provide the theoretical grounding for our analysis of such themes in written discourse. Lance (1998) has reported compelling evidence from computer analyses of written texts read aloud to further support this procedure for determining the theme-rheme boundary.

The second distinction is between *given* and *new* information, terms which reflect the writer's assumptions about the reader's prior knowledge of the information in the text. *Given* information, or old information, usually appears first in a clause and is expressed in or recoverable from the preceding context or from the situational context. *New* information, on the other hand, is knowledge that the writer assumes the reader does not already have but needs in order to follow the progression of the argument. The distinction between given and new corresponds essentially with the theme-rheme distinction in *unmarked* sentences, ones in which the order of elements in the sentence follows the expected SV(O)(ADV) order, as in the opening sentence quoted above from the psychology article.

The interplay of theme and rheme and given and new may vary considerably, depending on the informational purposes of the sentence in its context. Halliday distinguishes between *marked* and *unmarked* sentences in order to account for deviations from the expected ordering of the theme-rheme and given-new components of the sentence. He states that *unmarked* sentences typically have themes that overlap with subjects, as in the opening sentence of the psychology passage. *Marked* sentences, on the other hand, often contain a theme that is separate from the subject, as in sentences with pre-posed adverbial groups or prepositional phrases, such as *In the morning, John walks to school*, where the prepositional phrase, *In the morning*, is the theme and *John* is the subject. *Marked* sentences most often alter the expected SV(O)(ADV) order of the English sentence by foregrounding given ornew information to satisfy the demands of the discourse.

Analyzing Sentential Themes

To convey information effectively, writers must be able to control the flow of given and new information in developing the argument in the text. When writers write, they have some information to dispense to readers, and they will organize relevant information into themes so as to keep the reader apprised of the topic, and distribute information new to the argument efficiently and convincingly by embedding it into themes and rhemes so as to further the purposes of the argument. Thus, writers must know where to place information within a sentence, how to put that information in perspective, and how to employ sentential themes to keep the focus of the discourse clear. Knowing how to manage the content of the sentence in extended discourse is important in communicating information effectively to readers.

In the psychology article, the writers use a variety of sentential themes for different purposes. The most commonly used theme is the unmarked theme, which overlaps with the grammatical subject. Consider the following sentences that comprise the opening paragraph of the psychology article:

> (1) Research has demonstrated that /// negative judgments may be made about persons who seek professional help in dealing with psychological problems (e.g., Dovidio, Fishbane, & Sibicky, 1985; Parish and Kappes, 1979; Sibicky and Dovidio, 1986). (2) Individuals institutionalized for psychiatric problems /// have been most negatively evaluated, although Phillips (1963) reported that even counseling provided by clergy is stigmatized. (3) Parish and Kappes (1979) found that /// someone described as a "typical person seeking counseling" was evaluated more negatively than a "typical person" for whom no reference about counseling was made. (4) These investigators concluded that /// help-seeking behavior itself is stigmatized.

In this paragraph, sentences (1), (3), and (4) contain unmarked themes. These sentential themes function to carry given information, a starting point for the reader's understanding of the new information that follows in the rheme of each sentence. In sentence (1), the theme, "Research has demonstrated," is the point of departure for the sentence; it is information the writer assumes is presupposable for readers of this scholarly article. In other words, because readers expect some discussion of the relevant literature when a research study is published in a scholarly journal, the writers begin with a given theme, which says to readers that the sentence is about research demonstrating something. And what the research is demonstrating is expressed in the rheme, which begins with the dependent noun clause and continues to the end of the sentence. Notice that sentences (3) and (4) also begin with unmarked themes. "Parish and Kappes" in sentence (3) and "These investigators" in sentence (4) show that the focus of the discussion is on research pertinent to the present study.

But what about the theme in sentence (2)? After listing citations at the end of sentence (1), the writers want to depict the range of the research on stereotypes related to help-seeking behavior. Rather than using another reference in the theme, the writers begin sentence (2) with a nominal group containing a given head word—"Individuals"—and a modifying adjectival phrase that introduces new information. Thus, another function of sentential themes is to foreground new information in modifiers (pre-determiners, adjectives, or prepositional phrases) anchored to the given information in the head word. The contrastive stress on the word "institutionalized" in the theme of sentence (2) is a type of marking that occurs when the writer wants to narrow the focus of the discussion. Unlike the other sentential themes in the paragraph, the theme in sentence (2) is marked because it contains new information.

This kind of theme occurred most frequently in the methods section of the psychology article. As is customary in experimental research articles, this section of the article begins with the heading "Method" and includes two subheadings, "Subjects" and "Procedures." The frequency of themes with both given and new elements in this particular section suggests that under certain circumstances new information in experimental studies can be foregrounded, such as when headings help to identify the nature of the content. Another factor that motivates the use of this particular kind of theme is the preference for the agent-less passive. Consider the first sentence under the subheading "Subjects":

> Twelve hundred directors of graduate medical training programs in six medical specialties—family medicine, pediatric, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, psychiatry, and surgery— /// were randomly selected from the 1984-1985 Directory of Residency Training Programs, published by the American Medical Association, as the subjects for this investigation.

The theme contains new elements in both pre-and post-modifiers of the grammatical subject. If the writer had chosen to cast this sentence as an unmarked sentence, it might have been written something like this:

> The subjects for this investigation /// were twelve hundred directors of medical training programs in six specialties—family medicine, pediatric, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, psychiatry, and surgery—randomly selected from the 1985-1985 Directory of Residency Training Programs, published by. . . .

However, because the sentence is preceded by the subheading "Subjects," the writer chose to foreground new information in the theme so as not to repeat given information already supplied in the subheading. It is a tactical sentence adjustment to avoid uninformative repetition.

Another kind of sentence theme is one that functions like a conventional transition device, though more explicitly. This kind of theme signals a transition that serves to link chunks of new information in the discourse. It occurs when some constituent in the sentence is foregrounded so that the reader is better able to understand how the new information is connected to the preceding context. Consider, for example, the following sentences from the second paragraph of the introduction:

> (1) One explanation for this finding /// is that help-seeking behavior may imply that an individual is incapable of handling his own problems. (2) On the basis of this assumption, /// unfavorable characteristics may then be attributed to a person who has received psychological counseling.

The theme in the first sentence contains both given and new elements, like the kind I discussed previously. The writers mark the first sentence to emphasize the cardinal numeral: they are suggesting one explanation "for this finding," a reference to a conclusion stated in the preceding paragraph. In sentence (2), however, the theme functions to enable the reader to relate the new information in the rheme to what has been expressed in sentence (1). It foregrounds information that the writers determine is necessary for the reader to understand the new information expressed in the rheme. Their assertion that "unfavorable characteristics may then be attributed to a person who has received psychological counseling" is based on an explicit assumption that the writers know is important for readers to follow the progression of the argument.

These kinds of sentence themes tend to occur most frequently in the Discussion and Conclusion section of the psychology article because it is here that the writers must discuss the findings of the study in relation to the literature reported in the introduction. The expository detail in the discussion places greater demands on the writers to control the flow of given and new information for effective communication; thus, the writers need to know when it is necessary or appropriate to foreground information to enable the reader to follow the discussion. Sentential themes also tend to be longer in this section of the article. For example, after discussing the limitations of their study, the writers begin a new paragraph with a marked sentence, one with an adverbial clause as theme:

> Although limitations of our study raise some questions about how program directors arrived at their conclusions about the student, /// the findings suggest that decision makers in medical education negatively perceive students with a known history of psychological counseling for stress-related problems.

By foregrounding the information in the adverbial clause, the writers provide a link between the discussion of limitations in the preceding paragraph and the findings of their study, the focus of the new paragraph.

Finally, there is the kind of theme that functions to highlight new information when the writer wants to introduce a new topic into the discussion. In "there" constructions, for example, a dummy

element in subject position allows for new information to be moved into the theme. A good example of this occurs in the "Method" section under the subheading "Procedure." The writers begin by describing, in two sentences, the kinds of information sent to the residency directors who participated in the study. In the third sentence, they shift the topic to a description of their experimental design, and since that topic is new at that point in the discussion, they use an empty "there" in the theme:

> There were four experimental conditions /// (Gender x Counseling History), although the basic description of the applicant was held constant.

The "there" construction moves the new topic into the theme of the sentence but not at the beginning where readers would expect to find given information. In succeeding sentences, now that the topic of experimental conditions has been introduced, it can be used as given information and placed in themic position (e.g., "The four possible combinations...").

These various kinds of sentential themes occur in written academic discourse—in this case, in a scholarly article in psychology. They enable writers to maintain the focus of their discussion and to further their argument by managing given and new information for their readers. The writers of the psychology article know how to use sentential themes to manage information effectively in their sentences. It is one aspect of sentence style that they have learned in order to write successfully for readers in their discourse community, i.e., for researchers and practitioners in the field of counseling psychology.

Implications for Teaching Sentence Revision

An analysis of sentential themes in written academic discourse has some very clear implications for the teaching of college writing. With the emphasis on process pedagogy, writing instructors are always interested in learning new strategies that can help to facilitate their students' learning. Some of the revising strategies that have worked best for me as a teacher of writing are ones that engage students in reflective practice, a conscious awareness of what a writer does to a text in the process of revising and how that change affects a reader's understanding of the text. In teaching students about revision, I have found concepts from discourse analysis helpful in explaining problems of sentence style in student papers, and students have reported success in applying the concepts to analyses of their own writing. These concepts are tools for analyzing written discourse, and writers need a storehouse of tools to solve the problems they encounter in the process of writing and revising. While it is clear that not all students will find these concepts useful, I make them available and encourage students to experiment with them when revising.

Unfortunately, there is no single method that has proven effective in teaching sentence style. Exercises that teach clause and sentence structure in isolation ignore the textual and situational factors that influence sentence revision. Sentence-combining exercises were generally effective and widely used in the 1980s, but they have fallen out of use in recent years. Students often fail to transfer sentence patterns they practice in such drills to their own writing. Handbooks are often of little help to students because they offer prescriptions such as "vary your sentence structure" and "avoid passives" that lead students to believe that changes in sentence structure serve stylistic purposes only. When revising sentences in a piece of writing, good writers base their decisions on

the informational content of the sentences in context. They consider the textual and situational factors that guide their revisions. An analysis of sentential themes is one strategy that may help students to focus attention on what kind of information they place in themes and how that information functions to communicate their message to readers.

A common writing assignment in introductory composition is the summary paper in which students are asked to summarize an article or other reading assignment. Although summary is a basic form of writing that students usually consider "easy writing," most quickly discover its challenges. What they learn is that it requires a close reading of the text and an accurate, objective, clear, and complete reporting of its content. The following text is a draft of a student paper that summarizes an article by S. I. Hayakawa on English Only, a movement to legislate English as the official language in the United States. I chose this student draft because it illustrates, in an obvious way, a common problem with sentence style in student writing.

When I met with this student to discuss her draft, I asked her why she chose to begin each sentence the same way throughout the draft. The student responded that she had been told in previous writing classes that she needed to work on maintaining a clear focus in her writing. When she wrote this first paper for my class, she said that she very consciously structured each sentence to begin with the same subject—Hayakawa (or the third-person pronoun)—in order to maintain her focus. The draft, reproduced below, consists of 11 sentences or, for purposes of analysis, 12 t-units (a t-unit being an independent clause with all subordinate structures), each subject having the same reference. All 12 t-units in the draft are unmarked. The triple slashes mark the division between theme and rheme, i.e. the location of lowered pitch and syllable-lengthening indicating a "pause," followed by an abrupt rise in pitch in the next phrase (cf. Lance 1998).

STUDENT DRAFT

(1) Hayakawa is concerned that /// our country will become divided into a bilingual and bicultural society unless we establish English as our official national language. (2) He begins /// by touching on the emotions of patriotism when he discusses the metaphor of the melting pot. (3) He then mentions /// the Hispanic-American metaphor of the salad bowl, which suggests a separation rather than a blending of cultures. (4) Hayakawa gives three quotations /// to illustrate that there is a move to divide the United States into a bilingual and bicultural society. (5) He does not explain /// how or why it would cause division. (6) Hayakawa states that /// because of his strong concern that our country would become divided, he has personally become involved. (7a) He has introduced /// a constitutional amendment that would designate English as the official national language and (7b) he is also /// honorary chairman of U. S. English. (8) Hayakawa defends himself and the U.S. English organization /// against critics who accuse the organization of racism. (9) He informs his readers that /// he is a non-white immigrant, that three of the six members of the board are immigrants, and that all know one language other than English. (10) He finishes /// by saying that history shows countless immigrants have learned the English language in order to blend into the American culture. (11) He states that /// the immigrants today are capable of doing the same

The themic foci in this draft tend to be verbs that do not carry much information (e.g., "begins," "mentions"). In my conference with the student, I explained how writers manage informa-

tion in sentential themes to control the flow of given and new information for their readers. I used the terms *sentential theme, marked* and *unmarked*, and *given* and *new* as we read through the draft. Some of the terms were easier for the student to grasp than others, but after reading through the draft with her several times and talking about information management, using the concepts I had introduced, I felt that she had begun to see her sentences in a new light. When she revised her draft, reproduced below, she combined a few sentences to eliminate unnecessary words and marked some sentences by foregrounding information. The revised draft consists of 8 sentences or 9 t-units; of these 9 t-units, 6 are unmarked and 3 are marked (t-unit 4a, with an infinitive phrase as sentential theme; t-unit 6, with prepositional phrases; and t-unit 8, with an adverbial clause). The result is a more coherent piece of writing.

REVISED STUDENT DRAFT

(1) Hayakawa is concerned that /// our country will become a bilingual and bicultural society unless we establish English as our official national language. (2) He begins /// by touching on the emotions of patriotism when he discusses the metaphor of the melting pot. (3) He then contrasts this metaphor /// with the Hispanic-American metaphor of the salad bowl, which suggests a separation rather than a blending of cultures. (4a) To support his belief that we are becoming a divided nation, /// he uses three quotations, (4b) but he does not explain /// how or why our nation is in trouble. (5) Hayakawa states that /// because of his strong concern that our country will become divided, he has personally become involved. (6) As honorary chairman of U. S. English, /// he has introduced a constitutional amendment that would designate English as the official national language. (7) He defends himself and the U.S. English organization /// against critics who accuse the organization of racism by informing readers that he is a non-white immigrant, that three of the six members of the board are immigrants, and that all know one language other than English. (8) Because history shows that countless immigrants have learned the English language and blended into American culture, /// Hayakawa believes that immigrants today are capable of doing the same.

While there are still further revisions that would improve this piece of writing, the student has made considerable progress in eliminating the repetition of sentence patterns in her summary and, at the same time, reducing the wordiness of her draft. In marking (4a) with an infinitive phrase, for example, she foregrounds new information to draw the reader's attention to Hayakawa's support for his claim that our country is in danger of fragmenting, and she adds a contrasting clause (t-unit 4b) to show that his support is hardly compelling. Although (4b) is an evaluative statement, the writer is beginning to understand that placing new information in the theme can serve to highlight information for the reader's understanding of what follows in the rheme of the sentence.

By identifying the kinds of sentential themes used by academic writers to control given and new information in published writing, I have attempted to show how an analysis of themes in student writing is one way for teachers of writing to help their students revise sentence style and manage information effectively. The concepts used in theme analysis provide a way for teachers and students to talk about the informational structure of the sentence, and learning to manage information in sentential themes is essential for effective communication.

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GLOSSARY

Theme / Rheme—The division of information within a sentence so as to direct the reader's attention to information that is needed at any particular stage of an argument within a text.

> **Theme**—The point of departure providing the "setting" for the information that is to follow. "What the sentence is about"; "the point of departure" for the discussion of the rheme. The theme is given a single tone contour, with a pitch on the word (or words) that mark the informational focus of the theme; the pitch is lowered perceptibly after the focal syllable and remains low until the sharp pitch drop that marks the theme-rheme boundary.
>
> **Rheme**—The information about the theme that the writer wants the reader to add to the argument at a particular point in the progress of the argument in the text. The rheme consists of a single major tone contour but may contain more than one subordinate information units within it.

Given / New— Assumptions that the writer makes about the prior knowledge of the reader.

> **Given**—Knowledge that the writer can assume the reader knows from one of three sources: Presupposable Given Information, information that may be assumed to be known by any member of the discourse community that serves as the audience for a spoken or written texts; Contextually Given Information, information directly or indirectly related to the subject matter of a written or oral text; and Textually Given Information, information that has already been mentioned in the text.
>
> **New**—Information that the writer provides in a text for the purpose of furthering the argument. The information may already be known to the audience but not yet specifically associated with the argument.
>
> **Unmarked Sentence**—One in which the order of elements in the sentence follows the canonical sequencing expected in the language in which the sentence is expressed (in English: SV(O)(ADV)).
>
> **Marked Sentence**—One in which the constituents are not placed in their "expected" positions or the sentence focus does not occur on the last lexical item in the sentence. Three major types of markedness are Thematization, which entails placing in initial position a structure other than the nominal group that serves as the subject of the sentence; Pseudo-Thematization, which entails placement of focal pitch on a modifier of the subject in what otherwise might be an unmarked sentence; and Rhematization, which entails placing in a rheme á structure that also could be used as the subject of the sentence and, in appropriate circumstances, the theme of the sentence. One effect of rhematization is that it places most of the referential elements in focal position.

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